

WATER & SPIRIT MINISTRIES

RADICAL  
RIGHTEOUSNESS:  
The Narrow Gate of  
Discipleship

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## Radical Righteousness: the Narrow Gate of the Kingdom of God

Welcome to an exploration of Matthew 7.13-27. This passage is especially important and warrants careful examination as we see Jesus issuing guidance and warning to disciples and others desiring entry into the kingdom of God; this guidance suggests that we must have a radical commitment to the Kingdom's ethics and standard of conduct. This standard of conduct is presented during the Sermon on the Mount, which forms the critical context of this exploration.

The sermon announced good news to those who earnestly desired a renewed relation with God. This relationship is to be realized in the imminent kingdom that brings with it the fulfillment of the promises of the covenant which is restored and made new through Christ, the true Israel. Therefore, the opportunity to worship God (enter his presence) in a restored and improved relationship is made possible through Christ by his restoration and renewal of the covenant. Those committed to righteousness, e.g. acting in accordance to the will of God – obeying his voice and keeping his law, will be those who are entering and committed to keeping this new covenant for these are those who accept the reign of Christ as their Great King (suzerain) and master (teacher) by hearing and following his sayings.

And the Scripture read:

Matthew 7. 13 – 27:

- 13 “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.
- 14 “Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.
- 15 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.
- 16 “You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?
- 17 “Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.
- 18 “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.
- 19 “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.
- 20 “Therefore by their fruits you will know them.
- 21 “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.
- 22 “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’
- 23 “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’
- 24 “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock:
- 25 “and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.
- 26 “But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand;
- 27 “and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.”

The “gate” that Jesus is advocating is the commitment to repentance and righteousness – repentance defined as a genuine, whole-hearted (total) change in one’s life by turning to God, and righteousness is viewed as living in accordance with the voice, word, and will of God (e.g., His law). The “narrowness” of the gate infers the radical nature of the commitment to repentance and righteousness that is required in order to find the way to life. An examination of the dimensions of this “narrow gate” may provide some insights into the way of Christ. Additionally, our exploration of Jesus’ expectations for righteousness in our conduct should result in the reconciliation of the following: Jesus’ assertion that his “...yoke is easy”, in light of the professed difficulty of this narrow gate; and Jesus’ stern reminder that the law remains until heaven and earth pass away in light of Paul’s contention that we are no longer under law, as Paul holds that it is faith, not observance of law, that leads to righteousness. For these appear to be contradictions, but if truth does not contradict truth, then truth should reconcile and eliminate any apparent contradictions.

We should note that the gate is the entry to the eternal Kingdom of God that is realized on that final day of judgment. The kingdom of God on earth which Jesus established upon his first coming will become that eternal kingdom, but everyone who is in this earthly kingdom will not be admitted into that eternal kingdom, the completed kingdom that Christ will submit to the Father on that day.

The kingdom transformation of this world is made complete (Rev 11.15), and entry into this eternal kingdom is discussed in this passage:

Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!” Rev 11.15

This necessarily follows the judgment of that day, for Christ tells us that he will separate the “wheat from the tares” that are in the progressing and now-present kingdom (Matthew 13.24-30, 37-43).

“The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather [out of His kingdom](#) all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Mat 13.41-42

Note, “those who practice lawlessness” and “all things that offend” were taken “out of His kingdom.” Therefore, the kingdom of God on earth (the church, the body of Christ), has within it both those who will find eternal life and those who will be cast into the furnace of fire. Jesus is telling us that few will find the life of the narrow gate, while many will be cast out into destruction.

That this gate is a very constricted path, an extremely tight squeeze in which one must make a continued effort in order to pass through is indicated in the Greek New Testament by an emphatic expression of the narrowness (How narrow...and difficult!!). This speaks directly to the need to be steadfastly committed, radically committed, to repentance and righteousness. For this is basically a restatement of the warning Christ issued at Matthew 5.20:

“For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus went on in the Sermon on the Mount to more explicitly define the quality of righteousness required. Again, I define righteousness as serving the will of God, obeying his voice (or law). Jesus exercised his authority over the law to define the law so to reveal its true essence and meaning; this was possible through Jesus who, being perfect, brought perfection and completion to the law – only Jesus could reveal the law in its full and intended meaning.

This fulfillment of law by Jesus revealed the fallacy of the scribes and Pharisees, who had misapplied the law by overemphasizing and greatly expanding ritual purity law (related to temple rituals and cleanliness) and by indoctrinating human traditions as law. Jesus’ corrections included the admonitions: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” to say that how we treat each other is more important than rituals and ritual purity; and “...in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrine the precepts of man” to express his displeasure at the distortion and corruption of the expressed will of God, for true law was given as the guidance, word, voice and will of God; the religion of man had subverted and used it (true law) as a means of control and domination.

It is in light of these misinterpretations, distortions and subversions of God’s will and voice that Jesus declared that his “...yoke is easy.” Relative to the burdensome use of the law by the scribes and the Pharisees, who imposed the law as an external control, Jesus’ command to love God and love one another (the essence of the law) is an internalized and easy yoke. For

as the law is written in the hearts, it is followed due to an internal desire rather than an external coercion. Righteousness becomes a matter of following the heart.

It is also at this point that we begin to see the perspective of Paul. For as Abraham was accorded righteousness by virtue of his faith, this can be seen as an expression of his love and reverence for God, for it was Abraham's revered regard for the word of God that fueled his faith. Likewise, our belief in Christ as the Son of God, our faith in the power of his death, burial and resurrection, and our love and reverence for Christ as our Great King and teacher enables us to declare ourselves dead to the world of sin and born to the will of the Father (through baptism). While the sinful world will remain tempting and will persecute those who refute its way, our restoration by the Spirit emboldens us to persevere and gives us the heart to exert the effort, lovingly, to do the will of the Father. So, though it is difficult, that which is impossible for man is possible with God, and children of God are given the endurance to enter by the narrow gate. This is a gift to us, accessible through faith.

So, when Paul says that we are not under the law, he is referring to the law of the Pharisees – and is correct in saying so. The physical temple has been destroyed, as we are now living temples; temple ritual laws do not apply. Neither do the laws derived from the indoctrination of human traditions apply to the children of God who seek to serve him rather than traditions of man. The true law is the voice and will of God, and through faith we are saved by the atonement of Christ and restored by the Spirit to lovingly follow Christ and serve the will of the Father. Through love and a radical commitment to our discipleship, we can faithfully follow Christ and serve the will of God, and thereby exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees. So, while we are not under the letter of the Pharisaic law, we have not abandoned the standard of ethics and righteousness of the true law, the voice and will of God.

Knowing the will of God is critical, and it is the traditional role of the prophet to make known God's will. The true prophets are inspired (in spirit) to speak for God, proclaiming God's message and interpreting or revealing his will. The false prophets speak from their own understanding (not from the Spirit) and often offer the popular view as they chose to proclaim

what the people desired to hear; they were more concerned with catering to people's expectations and promoting their own popularity and prosperity than serving God.

Jesus warns us to beware the false prophets. This is similar to the warnings we find in Jeremiah 14:14 – 15 (and Ezekiel 22.27) where prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple of Solomon, although true prophets were giving warnings of the impending doom, false prophets were giving false assurance that the people of Israel were the chosen ones of God and they and their temple would always be protected. These prophets were providing the people what they desired to hear, and this false assurance diverted people from the needed repentance.

Jesus is warning us not to fall prey to this, for what is truly needed is a radical commitment to repentance and righteousness; those who seek to comfort us by assuring us of an easy path to salvation and righteousness are diverting us from the quality of discipleship that is actually required. These false prophets who fail to inform of the narrowness of the gate will lead some to a false interpretation of God's will. Pleas of "have we not prophesied..., cast out demons..., done many wonders...?" will be met by Christ's declaration "I never knew you!" Those pleading for entry assert that they have done works in the name of Jesus; these are Christians! Yet, Christ declares, "I do not know you," for these Christians "practice lawlessness" by failing to heed God's voice and to do the will of the Father. They have not followed what Jesus had taught; they have not been faithful disciples.

The failure of "Christians" to aspire to and strive for genuine discipleship is at the heart of this passage. Some are under the impression that merely believing in Christ assures us of entry into the eternal kingdom. However, the faith of which Paul speaks goes beyond mere belief, for faith in Christ entails more than a mere passive activity. It is not enough to merely say that you believe in Christ, for one who truly believes will seek to follow Christ and do the will of the Father. The content, strength and centrality of one's beliefs are important, and these are revealed in one's actions. If what we believe is held strongly and is valued as central to our lives, then it will be reflected in our deeds. Recall, James tells us "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also." Therefore, acting as Christ acts

by doing the will of the Father becomes deeds of evidence of one's sincere belief in Christ, and as a consequence, of one's true discipleship.

One who truly believes becomes a branch of the great vine, for while the healthy tree bears good fruit, the diseased tree bears useless fruit. If we are truly branches of the great vine, Jesus Christ, we can bear nothing but good fruit, for this good fruit is doing the will of the Father. And if we are truly branches of Christ, his disciples, then we will do the Father's will. Those who bear bad fruit by doing contrary to the Father's will, cannot be branches of Christ. So, knowing and doing the Father's will is central to entry into the kingdom.

When we are born of water and the Spirit, the Spirit will guide us in the will of God; we are not, then, wholly dependent upon the interpretations of others. We have Luke 16:16 and Matthew 11:12-13 that tells us that prophecy ended with John (the Baptist); furthermore, people were entering without genuine repentance or without first considering the cost; they thoughtlessly and hastily accepted, in word only, the way of Christ.

“The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it.” Lk16.16

“And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.

“For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. Mt 11.12-13

We are not now dependent on prophets for interpreting the will of God, for the Spirit is available to help those committed to serving the Father. It will enable one to build on the rock-solid foundation of a heart-felt desire for righteousness (doing God's will). We achieve this by truly making Christ Lord of our lives; therefore, addressing him “Lord, Lord” is not mere words but is evidenced by how we live our lives as we make Christ the true Lord (king) and Master (teacher) of our lives. We learn from him how to be like him, an obedient son of God committed to doing the will of God; and we learn this by submitting to his just rule, reign, and example as king and teacher in all aspects of our lives. We do this by acknowledging always our citizenship in the kingdom of God, and by practicing kingdom ethics as taught by Christ. It is these ethics that are presented in the Sermon on the Mount, and we are to seriously study and adopt them. This way of life is not popular, as this way is not the way of the world, and not

many people venture this route. Yet, Jesus advises us that it is indeed wise to follow his teaching, and it is indeed foolish to hear his words and not follow them.

The Spirit gives us the strength of heart to endure the storms of life as we make the journey of discipleship. Following Christ, being true disciples of Christ, leads us to live according to kingdom ethics, to journey through the narrow gate of righteousness, and thus, to be a light to the world, for our lives declare to the world, 'Christ is Lord.'